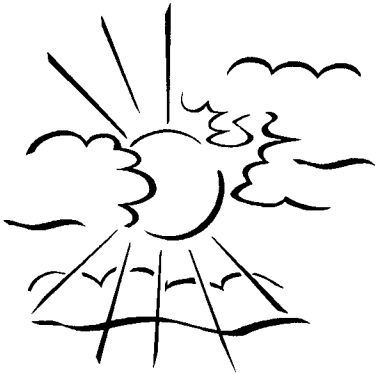


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*Important story at this spot

Articles in Today's Clips

Tuesday, January 17, 2006

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

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Children's checkup

Latest Michigan survey may give cause for optimism

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, January 16, 2006

Figures don't lie, but they are subject to misinterpretation even when intentions are benign. Thus it is best not to jump to any sure conclusions about the latest Kids Count in Michigan report, which does give some encouraging statistics regarding Genesee County.

Namely, Kids Count says that the rate of births to teenage mothers has been dropping significantly in this county - by a stunning 30 percent between 1994-96 and 2001-03.

During that same time span, deaths among the county's teens dropped an impressive 43 percent. The same study found more up-to-date figures available on high school drop-out rates, which fell by 44 percent from 1995-96 to 2003-04 in Genesee County, creating on the surface hope for a healthier and more literate culture on the part of the generation now approaching adulthood.

But this good news should be weighed against results of a survey last year that found seven of 10 babies born to Flint mothers were out of wedlock, a condition that all but ensures a prevalence of poverty and familial stress within the city.

However, the ultimate benchmark - numbers of children removed from their parental homes because of reports of abuse and neglect - increased in Genesee, Shiawassee and Lapeer counties, as throughout the state, Kids Count says. Some analysts attribute that to more demands on professionals who encounter possible abuse to report it to authorities.

Let's hope that explains the distressing reports of growth in foster care placement, and that the positive signs of change in teen birth rates are truly indicative of a renewed appreciation of delaying parenthood until marriage, with recognition that doing the opposite creates hardships for the families and undermines society.

While we remain somewhat skeptical about whether the Kids Count statistics show a firm trend, they are a welcome and hopeful sign that the social decline and loss of family life we have been experiencing for so long has struck bottom and begun to reverse course.

QUICK TAKE

The two Americas of Genesee County: Can they be one?'

No children are more vulnerable than those at society's bottom. Their plight, as well as their families', became visible to many when Hurricane Katrina news pictures highlighted New Orleans' poverty and America's underclass in general. How do we move these citizens into the nation's economic mainstream? A Genesee County panel will discuss possible remedies in a public forum: "The two Americas of Genesee County: Can they be one?" Where: International Institute, 515 Stevens St., Flint When: 7 p.m. Tuesday Admission: Free

Granholt, Public Service Commission, State Utility Companies Help Citizens Combat High Heating Costs

Governor reiterates call for additional state assistance, federal funding

January 17, 2005

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm today announced that the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC) has joined with Michigan's major utility providers and the Michigan Community Action Agency Association to launch the "Save Energy with Ease" program to provide thousands of free programmable thermostats, home energy conservation kits, and consumer education to Michigan residents. The announcement comes less than a week after Granholm asked the MPSC to make an additional \$25 million available immediately for low-income energy assistance.

"With natural gas prices at record highs this winter, we know that many Michigan residents are having great difficulty paying their bills," Granholm said. "Last fall, I signed the MPSC's emergency rules to help more people avoid shut-offs, and last week, I called for an additional \$25 million in grants to help low-income customers this heating season. This program is another way to help Michigan residents lower their energy bills."

In addition to taking action at the state level, Granholm reiterated her call to Congress to encourage increased funding for the Low Income Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Last September, the Governor led a bipartisan group of 28 governors who sent a letter to Congressional leaders asking them to take action.

Funded by DTE Energy, Consumers Energy Company, Indiana Michigan Power Company, and SEMCO Energy Gas Company, "Save Energy with Ease" will benefit Michigan residents of all income levels. Fifteen-hundred low-income residents already receiving weatherization services through the Michigan Department of Human Services will receive a free programmable thermostat installed by a weatherization expert. In addition, 3,450 Michigan residents will have the opportunity to attend a two-hour home energy conservation workshop and receive a free home energy conservation kit.

"With today's high energy costs, it is important that Michigan residents do everything they can to conserve energy and lower their bills," added MPSC Chairman J. Peter Lark. "'The Save Energy with Ease' program will help thousands of Michigan utility customers easily become more energy efficient, saving them money now and well into the future."

Programmable thermostats automatically dial down the thermostat at night and when no one is home. For every degree dialed down, customers can save 3 percent on their natural gas bills. The home energy conservation kits available to workshop participants contain numerous items to help make a home more energy efficient, including a caulk gun and clear caulk, three compact fluorescent light bulbs, a plastic window insulation kit for up to five windows, foam inserts for eight electrical outlets and four switches, spray foam, a bathroom faucet aerator, a

kitchen faucet aerator, a hot water temperature testing card, door weather-stripping (two 17-foot rolls), a refrigerator coil cleaning brush, and a programmable thermostat.

The workshops, to be held in February and March, will be administered by local area Community Action Agencies and are available to any Michigan resident (one per household) until registration is full. People should contact their local community action agency to register. A list of community action agencies is available on the MPSC's Website: michigan.gov/mpsc. Citizens may also call the MPSC's toll-free phone number (1-800-292-9555) for information on how to contact their local community action agency.

In addition to the utilities mentioned above, the Michigan Public Service Commission, Michigan Department of Human Services, Michigan Electric and Gas Association, Michigan Community Action Agency Association and local community action agencies are working together to plan and administer the program.

Chairman Lark also noted that more information on how to lower energy bills and a list of programs available to help low-income people is available on the Be WinterWise Website at michigan.gov/bewinterwise.

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Michigan Report

January 12, 2006

GRANHOLM CALLS FOR \$25 MILLION HEATING HELP

Governor Jennifer Granholm is seeking \$25 million from the Public Service Commission to supplement home heating costs for the low-income.

In a letter sent Thursday, Ms. Granholm asked the commission to respond quickly to the financial burdens caused by rising heating costs.

In a December meeting the commission pledged to increase the amount of funds available for the low-income and for energy efficiency programs this winter. In her letter, Ms. Granholm asked that \$25 million of that be dedicated to “Michigan’s most vulnerable citizens” who are struggling to pay high heating bills.

Meanwhile, the governor has restated her efforts to persuade Congress to provide similar assistance to the low-income. Last September, Ms. Granholm was among 29 governors that collaboratively wrote a letter urging congressional leaders to increase funding of the Low Income Energy Assistance Program “before a crisis develops.”

January 13, 2006

Lawmakers study options for winter heating bill relief State leaders are worried about the dramatic jump in natural gas prices.

Gary Heinlein / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Lawmakers hope this month to broaden a program that helps families who are struggling to pay home heating bills.

The cost of heat has gone up \$40-80 a month for the typical homeowner since last year. Despite early January's relatively balmy temperatures, state leaders are worried about the dramatic jump in natural gas prices.

Department of Human Services spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said the department wants to help more families pay their heating bills; it has the money, she said, to cover the added help.

The department hasn't taken a position on specific legislation.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm is seeking more federal money earmarked for heating assistance, Sorbet said. Granholm also has asked the Michigan Public Service Commission to dedicate an added \$25 million that could be made available through a commission order involving Consumers Energy.

"I think we realize we're going to run out of money this year in order to help all of the people who are going to need assistance with heating," Sorbet said.

More Michiganians would qualify for assistance under measures that House Republicans say they want to pass and send to the Senate for final action soon after the Legislature reconvenes on Jan. 25.

Lawmakers are on their annual break from full sessions right now, but some House and Senate committees will meet next week to get bills ready for a vote.

Michigan's energy assistance program is based on income and family size.

The Republican plan calls for an increase in the income guideline under which Michiganians qualify for home heating assistance.

The maximum income allowed for a three-member family to be eligible, for example, would increase from \$17,699 now to \$20,917 as soon as legislation took effect.

Those who qualify can get state treasury drafts that may be used only toward heating bills.

Application forms are available from the Michigan Treasury Department, or Michigan Department of Human Services offices in each county.

Republicans are the majority party in both legislative chambers. Other elements of their plan include income tax credits that would be available to low-income families if they bought energy-efficient appliances.

Such families, further, would be exempt from sales tax on energy-efficient appliances and on insulation or other building products that reduce heat loss from homes.

House Democrats have their own package of heating bills.

They want to prohibit power companies from cutting off heat to customers with overdue bills and set up a state information base that groups of volunteers could use in weatherization projects for the poor.

The Democratic plan would take \$5 million from a research fund held by the state's Public Service Commission and would use the money, instead, to help Michiganians pay for heat. House Republicans may or may not include some of the Democrats' proposals in the final package they send to the Senate.

Residents can get information about state energy assistance programs by calling a toll-free number during the day: 1-800-292-5650.

You can reach Gary Heinlein at (313) 222-2470 or gheinlein@detnews.com.

How they voted: Welfare limits

Here's how Metro Detroit members of the Michigan Senate voted on House bill 893, a measure to limit welfare recipient payments to 48 months (currently there is no limit). The legislation was vetoed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm but lawmakers plan to take up the controversial issue again this year.

Voting "yes": Michael Bishop, R-Rochester; Nancy Cassis, R-Nov; Valde Garcia, R-Howell; Dennis Olshove, D-Warren; Bruce Patterson, R-Canton; Alan Sanborn, R-Richmond; and Laura Toy, R-Livonia.

Voting "no": Raymond Basham, D-Taylor; Gilda Jacobs, D-Huntington Woods; Shirley Johnson, R-Troy; Burton Leland, D-Detroit; Martha Scott, D-Highland Park; Michael Switalski, D-Roseville; and Buzz Thomas, D-Detroit.

Cool off those utility bills

January 16, 2006

BY ALEJANDRO BODIPO-MEMBA
FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

If you're still trying to catch your breath from the shock of seeing \$300-\$400 monthly utility bills this winter, don't panic. Spending a little money and preparing now could save you a bundle in the long run when it comes to energy costs. Although we won't be able to cut your bill in half, the Free Press has seven hot tips that could save you cold cash by the time February rolls around.

Tax credit

Apply for the Home Heating Tax Credit. Qualified Michigan residents can file for the credit with the state's Department of Treasury and can get assistance with paying winter heating bills. The deadline for the 2005 tax year is Sept. 30, 2006. Go to www.michigan.gov/treasury.

Update your kitchen

Buy new appliances. A 26.9-cubic foot refrigerator bought in 1993 costs about \$90 a year to operate. That compares with \$56 for one that was built in 2001. Replacing an older refrigerator with an Energy Star qualified model will cut energy bills by \$30-\$70 a year, or \$980 over the life of the machine.

New windows

Replace single-pane windows with Energy Star-qualified windows at a cost of \$150-\$200 per window and save as much as \$270 a year.

Audit your home

Spend \$300-\$400 for a professional energy audit in January and make the necessary repairs in early February. You'll likely get a full return on your investment by May. Also, www.dteenergy.com and www.consumersenergy.com have free do-it-yourself energy audit resources. For more on energy audits, go to www.eere.energy.gov/consumer/your_home.

Warm water tank

Buy a \$20 insulation blanket to cover your hot water tank (if it's 7 years old or older) and you'll be able to recoup your investment in about two months. Available at hardware stores.

Go fluorescent

Replacing the five most-used lightbulbs in your home with Energy Star-qualified compact fluorescent bulbs that cost around \$10 each (23 watts). That should save about \$60 a year.

Turn it down

Buy a \$49 digital programmable thermostat that is preset to Energy Star-recommended levels now and you'll likely get your money back in savings by June. Reducing the temperature 15 degrees for eight hours overnight can also save from 5% to 15% on your heating bill, which adds up to \$30-\$45 back in your pocket in a month. For every degree you lower the thermostat you'll get a 2% or 3% reduction in your heating costs.

By Alejandro Bodipo-Memba

President Tells Insurers to Aid Ailing Medicare Drug Plan

By ROBERT PEAR
The New York Times

Published: January 16, 2006

With tens of thousands of people unable to get medicines promised by Medicare, the Bush administration has told insurers that they must provide a 30-day supply of any drug that a beneficiary was previously taking, and it said that poor people must not be charged more than \$5 for a covered drug.

The actions came after several states declared public health emergencies, and many states announced that they would step in to pay for prescriptions that should have been covered by the federal Medicare program.

Republicans have joined Democrats in asserting that the federal government botched the beginning of the prescription drug program, which started on Jan. 1. People who had signed up for coverage found that they were not on the government's list of subscribers. Insurers said they had no way to identify poor people entitled to extra help with their drug costs. Pharmacists spent hours on the telephone trying to reach insurance companies that administer the drug benefit under contract to Medicare.

Many of the problems involve low-income people entitled to both Medicare and Medicaid.

In a directive sent to all Medicare drug plans over the weekend, the Bush administration said they "must take immediate steps" to ensure that low-income beneficiaries were not charged more than \$2 for a generic drug and \$5 for a brand-name drug.

In addition, it said insurers must cover a 30-day emergency supply of drugs that beneficiaries were taking prior to the start of the new program.

In an interview yesterday, Dr. Mark B. McClellan, administrator of the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said that "several hundred thousand beneficiaries who switched plans" in December may have had difficulty filling prescriptions in the last two weeks.

In California, officials estimate that 200,000 of the state's 1.1 million low-income Medicare beneficiaries had trouble getting their medications.

Despite these problems, Dr. McClellan said, Medicare is now covering one million prescriptions a day. With the latest corrective actions, he said, "all beneficiaries should be able to get their prescriptions filled."

In the past, such predictions proved to be premature. New problems appeared as old ones were solved, and some insurers were slow to carry out federal instructions.

Since the program began on Jan. 1, many low-income people have left pharmacies empty-handed after being told they would have to pay co-payments of \$100, \$250 or more.

About 20 states, including California, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania and all of New England, have announced that they will help low-income people by paying drug claims that should have been paid by the federal Medicare program.

"The new federal program is too complicated for many people to understand, and the implementation of the new program by the federal government has been awful," said Gov. Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, a Republican. On Saturday, he signed an emergency executive order making the state a "payer of last resort" for the out-of-pocket drug costs.

The Bush administration said it was rushing to provide insurers with correct information about the extra subsidies available to low-income people enrolled in their plans.

"We sent files to all plans providing complete information on dual-eligible beneficiaries" entitled to both Medicare and Medicaid, Dr. McClellan said. "The plans now have all the information in one place."

The new drug benefit is the most significant expansion of Medicare since creation of the program in 1965.

The president of MemberHealth, which offers three national Medicare drug plans, has apologized to pharmacists for problems that plagued the new benefit.

"We expected much more of ourselves, and certainly our performance in the first two weeks was a disappointment," the company's president, Charles E. Hallberg, said in a letter sent Friday to pharmacists. "For that, I want to personally apologize to each of you."

Mr. Hallberg said that druggists "have experienced unacceptable wait times for customer service because we were unable to keep up with the extraordinary call volume."

In an interview, Mr. Hallberg said that 700,000 people had enrolled in his drug plans, marketed under the name Community Care Rx.

Any of the 42 million Medicare beneficiaries can sign up for the new drug coverage. Federal officials say that a surge in enrollments occurred in late December. About 6.2 million low-income people who had drug coverage under Medicaid were automatically enrolled in Medicare drug plans, and some of them have switched to other Medicare plans.

The handling of the drug benefit threatens to become a political liability for Republicans, as older voters and people with disabilities complain that they have been denied essential medications.

Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, a Republican who is chairman of the National Governors Association, declared a public health emergency.

In Wisconsin, Gov. James E. Doyle, a Democrat, said: "It is outrageous how the federal government has mishandled this program and put thousands of lives at risk. As an emergency measure, the state will step in to ensure that no seniors go without lifesaving medicines."

The Senate Democratic leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, said the mismanagement of the program had had "devastating consequences for seniors." In a letter signed by 34 other Democrats, Mr. Reid said, "We want to know why so many of our constituents have fallen through the cracks." Democrats had predicted many of the problems, he said.

The concern was bipartisan. Senator Judd Gregg, Republican of New Hampshire, said many people had been "turned away at their pharmacies or told that they must purchase the drugs up front and seek reimbursement later."

"These are very vulnerable people who do not have the means to pay for their prescriptions and who cannot go without their medications," Mr. Gregg said.

Drug Emergency

Quick fix buys some time for flawed Medicare plan

Detroit Free Press Editorial

January 17, 2006

The fact that the federal government has had to issue an emergency edict to make sure that people on Medicare get the drugs they need pretty much says it all about the launch of the new prescription plan.

And this fix is just a Band-Aid for one aspect of a flawed program.

But it buys some time. And now that this is the only program for millions of senior citizens and disabled people who were so encouraged to enlist, the feds had better use it to make the thing work.

Truth is, Washington had to be shamed into ordering that all Medicare prescriptions be filled for the first month of the program. At least nine states had already set aside money they do not have to make sure their citizens get the drugs they need. As many as one-fifth of the 1 million California residents who switched into the program Jan. 1 may have been wrongly denied their medications, officials told the Los Angeles Times.

What an abomination.

Many senior and disabled citizens have dutifully been doing what the government told them to -- reviewing their options and signing up before Jan. 1 -- only to spend countless hours dizzied by a Web site or on endless hold waiting to get questions answered or applications completed. To then find themselves "lost" by the people administering the benefit -- regularly hailed by the Bush administration as the most significant improvement in Medicare's 40-year history -- is worse than infuriating. It's dangerous.

Administration officials and plan administrators are happy to tout the number of applications and calls being processed each hour -- or to use the numbers as an excuse when problems arise. It's a lame one.

The government has known for longer than two years that more than 40 million people would be eligible for this program. Washington should have found a way to make enrollment run smoother.

It is good that the administration is reacting to this "emergency." It would have been better to prevent it.

Nursing Homes Confront New Drug Plan's Hurdles

By JANE GROSS
The New York Times

Published: January 15, 2006

MAMARONECK, N.Y., Jan. 12 - The drug cart rolls along the corridors of the Sarah Neuman Center for Healthcare and Rehabilitation here, dispensing medication to 244 nursing home residents. Coumadin for blood clots. Motrin for arthritis pain. Serzone for depression. Vasotec for high blood pressure. Aricept for Alzheimer's disease.

The nation's frailest elderly take an average of seven medications a day, a financial burden on individuals, families, institutions and state treasuries that inspired the Medicare prescription drug plan, which took effect on Jan. 1 and is available to 42 million Americans over the age of 65.

Nursing homes like Sarah Neuman are the first large-scale testing ground for the plan's confounding new bureaucracy. Here, the residents continue to get their medications, as recipients have not at some local pharmacies during the bumpy start-up of the plan, forcing state after state to declare health emergencies and pay the bills. But the problems play out in volume.

The tumult, largely invisible to residents, is in the back-office cubbyholes where the pharmacists, comptrollers, medical directors, information technology specialists, compliance officers and social workers try to make sense of 43 different drug plans, subsidized by the government but administered by private companies.

Lights burn way past business hours at Sarah Neuman, where six months of preparation, including a new computer system, has proven all but useless. Clarifications arrive from the federal government faster than even a team of professionals can keep up with them.

"Nobody at the moment understands what they're doing, and not for lack of trying," said Elaine Healy, the medical director at Sarah Neuman, the smallest of three campuses of the Jewish Home and Hospital Lifecare System.

through the cracks. Next they must assess the random assignments of residents to plans, decide whether to appeal the drugs not covered, prescribe different ones or switch plans. Meantime, they are educating a small minority of residents who receive only Medicare and pay for their own drugs; they have months to decide if they want the new coverage at all and then to choose a plan.

A running joke here is that the luckiest person on the staff is the one who was called for grand jury duty last week and thus spared the early scramble of making sure every resident had a plan. There is fallback coverage for those not properly assigned, but it requires a 14-step application process that Maria Wurpel, the pharmacist at Sarah Neuman, is desperate to avoid.

But the alternative to the 14 steps may be equally Kafkaesque, said Thomas Mathew, comptroller for the Jewish Home system. To track down an unassigned resident, it is necessary to document enrollment in both Medicare and Medicaid. A resident who had different ZIP codes when enrolling in each of the programs, a not uncommon situation, is often unrecognizable to the government's database.

Even those who received their new prescription drug cards on time are not home free. Each person has an ID number, an Issuer number, an Rx Bin number, an Rx PCN number and an Rx Group number. Type one digit wrong when ordering medications and the computer flashes an error message.

Why so many numbers and what do they all mean? "Ask the man above," said Annette Lobo, director of patient accounts for the Jewish Home system.

Each plan also has tiered subplans, labeled bronze, silver or gold. And each of those has its own formulary, the list of drugs that are covered, and its own appeals process for those that are not. But search the plans' Web sites looking for instructions for appeals. "Sorry, the document you request doesn't exist," comes the mannerly reply.

"Navigating this, if it doesn't get easier, could be someone's full-time job," Ms. Wurpel said, after an hour trolling without success for the appeals forms.

All this hassle may seem especially annoying to staff members in nursing homes, Dr. Healy said, since their Medicaid residents "were already captured by society's safety net" and, she said, are no better off today than they were in December.

The New England Journal of Medicine went further and speculated in a Dec. 29 article that nursing home residents on Medicaid who already received subsidized medications from the state "may inadvertently be made worse off" by the plan. That could happen if the replacement benefits from the federal government prove more restrictive or costly to administer than the old system.

Many large nonprofit nursing homes, including Sarah Neuman and its sister campuses, promise no wholesale substitution of one drug for another, even if it means absorbing the cost.

Trying to compare costs under the two systems is all but impossible, Ms. Wurpel said. Under the former system, for those on Medicaid, the state paid an all-inclusive fixed rate for each resident, wrapping drug costs in with room and board.

For some residents the rate exceeded real costs, for some it matched them and for others it did not come close, with the home absorbing the difference. Over all, officials at Sarah Neuman said, the home lost money. Now the daily portion of the Medicaid rate earmarked for drugs - \$6 and change for each resident - has been subtracted from the Medicaid reimbursement rate. Instead, drug claims must be submitted patient by patient, plan by plan, prescription by prescription and will be paid by Medicare instead. While the new system is much more labor intensive, "our hope is there will eventually be less loss," Ms. Wurpel said.

In the first two weeks of filing claims, many have been turned back because of computer glitches, not actual denials, and the home has barely begun testing the appeals process. Thus, Ms. Wurpel said, there is no way to calculate where they stand.

Regardless, said Rita Morgan, administrator of Sarah Neuman, the new plan, once its wrinkles are smoothed, will be a vast improvement for those who have no drug coverage at all. That was her father's situation; for the last five years of his life she paid for all his prescriptions.

"Thank God I had the wherewithal," Ms. Morgan said. "This is really designed to help people like my father, the elders in the community who can't afford their meds."

It is difficult to take that long view from the trenches, said Dr. Healy, the medical director, who hoped to have systems in place by the first of the year but was stymied at every turn. She wanted each plan's list of covered drugs at all seven nursing stations, within easy reach of prescribing physicians. But plans can change their lists at will, as quickly as someone posts them. Dr. Healy also wanted all the appeals forms available on the internal computer system, but so far nobody can find them to download.

So when the Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, a national trade group, said last week that the early rollout in nursing homes "has gone smoothly," eyes rolled at Sarah Neuman. Many here wondered, along with a few lawmakers and advocates for retirees, why the government had not postponed the start date until the kinks had been worked out.

Larry Minnix, the association president, said that kinks could only be worked out in real time.

"It's like moving water through a new plumbing system," Mr. Minnix said. "You have to start it up to see where the leaks and the blocks are. Then you can fix them."

Insurers Reminded About New Drug Plan

Bloomberg News

Tuesday, January 17, 2006; Page A02

The federal government has reminded insurers that they must cover a 30-day supply of any drug that patients in the new Medicare drug plan were receiving before the new program began. Insurance companies participating in the benefit cannot charge more than \$5 for that supply of brand-name medicines for low-income participants. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Medicare agency, outlined the changes in a letter dated Jan. 13 to insurers and state Medicaid directors.

The agency ordered the stopgap measures after states including California and New York reported that people had problems obtaining drugs under the program, which covers both elderly and disabled Americans through subsidized private plans. This is the second time this month the agency has reminded insurers of the importance of having a transition in place and issued rules to help make it easier.

"The greatest hardships are the poor people who have been lost in the various computer systems," Robert Hayes, president of the Medicare Rights Center, a consumer advocacy group in New York, said in a telephone interview today. "If the administration is now saying they mean it and the plans have to get in line, that should help."

About 21 million Americans had signed up for coverage, which began Jan. 1, the government reported last month. The figure includes more than 6 million who were automatically eligible because they took part in Medicaid, the federal-state program for the poor.

Governor Plans Agency to Fight Medicaid Fraud

By CLIFFORD J. LEVY
The New York Times

Published: January 14, 2006

Gov. George E. Pataki proposed yesterday that several state agencies that are supposed to fight Medicaid fraud be stripped of that responsibility, which would be given instead to a new agency. He pledged to spend millions of dollars to hire scores of investigators and other workers to police the Medicaid program, which provides health care for 4.2 million low-income New Yorkers.

Mr. Pataki, accepting the recommendations of a prominent former prosecutor who concluded that the state was faltering in its efforts against fraud, said he would move to create the agency to tackle widespread theft from the program by doctors, pharmacies and other health care providers. Mr. Pataki said the plan for the agency, to be run by the Medicaid inspector general, would be in the budget that he presents to the Legislature next week.

The former prosecutor, Paul Shechtman, detailed a range of problems in the program that he uncovered after studying its operations and holding dozens of meetings with government officials and private experts. One of his primary conclusions was that it was a mistake for the State Department of Health, the sprawling agency that runs Medicaid, to also be charged with rooting out fraud.

"This creates an inevitable conflict, as the desire to pay providers wars with efforts to ensure that monies are not misspent," he wrote in a letter to Mr. Pataki summarizing his findings.

Mr. Shechtman noted that other state agencies that play a role in the program, such as the Office of Mental Health, should also not be going after fraud.

New York's \$44.5 billion Medicaid program is by far the largest of any state, and even as its spending has surged in recent years, Albany has been cutting back on oversight.

After The New York Times published two articles last July that detailed how billions of dollars were being lost through fraud, waste and profiteering, Mr. Pataki appointed an inspector general for Medicaid and asked Mr. Shechtman to scrutinize the program.

Mr. Shechtman, who is also a former criminal justice aide to Mr. Pataki, suggested that the changes last year had not gone far enough. "New York can significantly improve its efforts," he wrote.

Other states in recent years have also removed antifraud jurisdiction from agencies that spend Medicaid money. Texas, for example, has set up a state inspector general's office that is considered a model to fight health care fraud.

The battle against Medicaid fraud in New York has long been shared by two agencies, the State Health Department, which is supposed to uncover it, and the Medicaid Fraud Control Unit in the state attorney general's office, which prosecutes it.

Both have come under criticism. The Times found last year that the Health Department referred only 37 cases of suspected fraud to the Medicaid Fraud Control Unit in 2004, far fewer than similar agencies in other large states. The amount of money recovered through the department's fraud and abuse inquiries has fallen by 70 percent since 2000, according to federal statistics.

The statistics also show that the attorney general's Medicaid Fraud Control Unit has often lagged its counterparts in other large states as well. But Paul Larrabee, a spokesman for the attorney general, disputed that assessment. He said that the unit had performed exceptionally well, adding that comparisons were meaningless because Medicaid prosecution units in different states have different duties.

In response to Mr. Shechtman's review, Mr. Pataki announced yesterday that he would adopt all of the recommendations when he presents his budget next week. Mr. Pataki said he would ask the Legislature to spend \$15 million to hire 81 new workers.

The new agency would absorb hundreds of workers from the antifraud divisions of the State Health Department, which would continue running Medicaid. (Mr. Shechtman did not call for changes in the Medicaid Fraud Control Unit.)

Mr. Pataki also proposed tougher penalties for Medicaid fraud, and new initiatives to allow the counties and New York City, which shoulder part of the cost of Medicaid, to play a bigger role in ferreting out fraud.

Lawmakers of both major parties, as well as Attorney General Eliot Spitzer's office, responded positively to the governor's proposal, though they said they wanted to see more details in the budget.

The Republican majority in the State Senate, which has regularly advocated tighter controls on Medicaid, said it would release its own initiative that expands on Mr. Pataki's.

Assemblyman Richard N. Gottfried, a Manhattan Democrat who is chairman of the Health Committee, said he had also been working with Mr. Spitzer's office to develop legislation that would give the attorney general's office more authority to combat Medicaid fraud.

"It's clear that the Health Department could and should be doing a lot more on Medicaid fraud than it has been," Mr. Gottfried said. "Whether an administrative reorganization is the key, I'm not sure. Sometimes you need to do that just to shake things up and get a new team in place."

In his review, Mr. Shechtman said the new agency needed more workers to screen out suspect applications for expensive medical equipment, and to evaluate the results of computer analyses of Medicaid spending. He said the program suffered from a shortage of medical professionals who could help auditors understand health care records. He emphasized that money saved with the additional scrutiny would more than cover the costs of additional workers.

The state needs to coordinate its efforts with federal officials, he said, and needs to mount a vigorous campaign to communicate information about questionable providers with others in the health care field.

"Throughout my review, I have been surprised by how poorly information is shared by those involved in preventing health care fraud and waste," he said. "Everyone in 'the business' knows that a provider who is defrauding one program is likely to be defrauding others, yet there is little communication among programs."

Separate from the antifraud proposals, Mr. Pataki also announced budget measures intended to reduce Medicaid costs by \$1.3 billion. The measures would cut spending on pharmaceuticals,

close loopholes that make it easy to receive Medicaid for nursing home care and expand enrollment in managed care.

Mr. Pataki has regularly proposed these types of measures, and they have often been defeated in the Legislature, where health care lobbies are influential.

Boyfriend Charged With Murder In Death Of 8-Month-Old Baby

Police: Man Said Boy Wouldn't Stop Crying

POSTED: 2:02 pm EST January 13, 2006

A Canton man accused in the death of his girlfriend's 8-month-old baby was charged with felony murder in the boy's death.

Carlee Hines Jr., 23, was arraigned Friday in 35th District Court.

Police and fire crews responded to a 911 call from a home on Sheldon Road of a child not breathing at about 9 a.m. Tuesday. Officers determined the boy died sometime during the night, Canton police said.

Hines was allegedly babysitting the infant at the woman's home when he said the boy would not stop crying.

"The 8-month-old began crying, and at one point he lost his temper," said Canton police Sgt. Richard Pomorski.

An autopsy by the medical examiner revealed the boy died from blunt-force trauma. His injuries included eight cracked ribs, internal bleeding and a ruptured spleen and liver, Local 4 reported. Hines is currently lodged in the Wayne County Jail. His preliminary exam is scheduled for Friday, Jan. 27.

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Mother's Boyfriend Accused In Fatal Infant Abuse

23-Year-Old Admits To Losing Temper, Police Say

POSTED: 7:19 am EST January 12, 2006

UPDATED: 1:35 pm EST January 12, 2006

CANTON, Mich. -- The 23-year-old boyfriend of a mother whose 8-month-old boy was found dead in a Canton home admitted to losing his temper, according to police.

Police and fire crews responded to a 911 call from a home on Sheldon Road of a child not breathing at about 9 a.m. Tuesday. Officers determined the boy died sometime during the night, Canton police said.

The boyfriend -- whose name has not been released -- was babysitting the infant at his mother's home when he said the boy would not stop crying.

"The 8-month-old began crying, and at one point he lost his temper," said Canton police Sgt. Richard Pomorski.

An autopsy by the medical examiner revealed the boy died from blunt-force trauma. His injuries included eight cracked ribs, internal bleeding and a ruptured spleen and liver, Local 4 reported.

The boyfriend was arrested Wednesday. He was being held at the Canton Police Department pending an arraignment, which could come Thursday or Friday, Local 4 reported.

The man could face felony murder charges, the station reported.

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Man charged in death of girlfriend's baby

Saturday, January 14, 2006

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

Carlee Hines, who lived with the child's 20-year-old mother, was watching the infant while the mother worked for 12 hours at two jobs on Monday.

Sometime between 6 and 9 p.m., Canton Township Police Sgt. Rick Pomorski said, Eryck Fossett suffered blunt force trauma to his torso, including broken ribs, spleen and liver lacerations and broken blood vessels in his eyes. Pomorski said the medical examiner told investigators that the baby's injuries were not caused by any weapon.

Albert Samuels, chief investigator for the medical examiner, said the cause of death was blunt force trauma.

Pomorski said Hines told the woman when she arrived at home that her son was sleeping peacefully so, without checking on him, the couple went out, leaving his care to other people in the home.

Hines went to wake the baby at about 9 a.m. Tuesday, Pomorski said, and found him cold and not breathing. The baby's mother made a matter-of-fact call to 911, and told the dispatcher that someone in her home was performing CPR, Pomorski said.

He said the child's mother never checked on him between the time she arrived home Monday night and the time Hines found him dead at 9 a.m. the next day. But he said the police department has no record of any previous calls to the home, and the mother is not a suspect in the child's death. Eryck was her only child. Police are not releasing her name.

Pomorski said Hines later told police the child had been crying Monday night, and he wanted to quiet him down. He would not say whether the man confessed, but did say "he made statements to us. Those statements, we feel, corroborate the injuries the medical examiner found."

He said other people were in the two-story home at the time the injuries were probably inflicted, but they don't live on the same floor where Hines lived with the baby's mother.

"We have not found any proof anybody knew anything about this," Pomorski said. "And believe me, we hunted for it."

Hines faces the possibility of life in prison without parole if convicted of felony murder. The felony murder charge is used when a murder is committed during the course of a separate felony - in this case, child abuse.

Hines was ordered held without bond pending preliminary examination in 35th District Court in Plymouth on Jan. 27.

Susan Oppat can be reached at soppat@annarbornews.com or at (734) 482-1166.

REDFORD TOWNSHIP

Man may face more sexual abuse charges

A Redford Township man who was charged in December with fondling a 15-year-old Pontiac girl will now likely face similar charges in the township. A 17th District Court judge signed an arrest warrant for Jeffrey Isabel-Taylor, 33, who is being held in Pontiac. Redford officer David Holt said after the Pontiac charges surfaced, a local girl came forward alleging incidents involving Taylor between August 2003 and December 2004. Taylor ran unsuccessfully for Redford Township trustee in 2004.

*Detroit News staff reports and
wire services.*

Hundreds Mourn Slain Girl, Moved by a Life Too Sad and Too Short

By FERNANDA SANTOS
The New York Times

Published: January 17, 2006

The line outside the R. G. Ortiz Funeral Home on the Lower East Side of Manhattan snaked a half-block north along First Avenue yesterday before veering east on Second Street, stretching as far as the eye could see.

Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Hundreds of people attended the wake of Nixzmary Brown.

The first people arrived at noon, carrying flowers and balloons, toys and sympathy cards. They waited for hours in the bitter cold for a chance to see the girl who lay inside in a gold-rimmed coffin, her gloved hands clasped over her stomach, the bruises on her face masked by makeup. Few, if any, knew the girl, Nixzmary Brown, but all knew the story of her sad, short life.

Nixzmary died Wednesday at the age of 7, in her family's apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, after months of systematic abuse, the authorities say. They have said that her stepfather, Cesar Rodriguez, tortured and molested her, then beat her to death when she took a container of yogurt from the refrigerator without his permission.

Mr. Rodriguez, 27, has been charged with murder and endangering the welfare of a child.

Nixzmary's mother, Nixzaliz Santiago, 27, faces charges of manslaughter, reckless endangerment and endangering the welfare of a child. Authorities said she stood by while her daughter lay on the floor, naked and unconscious, after the fatal beating.

"She died with dreams and hopes never to be fulfilled," said one mourner, Luis Negrón, 35, a doorman on the Upper East Side who lives not far from where Nixzmary lived.

Mr. Negrón was one of at least 500 people who filed through the funeral home from 3 and 9 p.m. to pay their respects to a girl who has come to represent the failures of a system set up to protect New York City's children from abuse and neglect.

A long series of alarms preceded Nixzmary's death. At Public School 256, teachers noticed that she was missing classes, looked malnourished and had bruises around her eyes. They filed numerous complaints, and in response, city child welfare workers talked to the girl and her parents, visited her apartment, on Greene Avenue, and took her to a doctor. But in the end, they saw no reason to remove her from her home.

At one point, two police detectives accompanied caseworkers visiting Nixzmary. A doctor was also called to examine her black eye and agreed that her injury could have occurred during a fall, which is how her family had explained it. In the weeks before her death, caseworkers were repeatedly barred from entering her home, but did not take the steps to get a warrant granting them access.

Each missed opportunity to save Nixzmary has been painstakingly detailed in newspapers and on television, seizing the hearts of New Yorkers and fueling outrage over a death that could have been averted.

"I haven't been able to sleep right," George Joseph, 42, of Mount Vernon, N.Y., said as he was about to enter the funeral home. "I haven't been able to eat right. I've been having nightmares. I keep thinking of her last few hours, screaming for help.

"I felt compelled to come here," Mr. Joseph added. "I thought if I came here and saw her with a peaceful look on her face, I could see her at rest and feel a little better about what happened to her."

Many who attended the wake said they had come to grieve for Nixzmary as though they were grieving for a sister, a daughter or a close friend. Some, like Ramona Polanco, 38, a nurse from Corona, Queens, cried while waiting in line.

"I can't explain why, but it's like this girl was family to me," Ms. Polanco said as she clutched the hands of her daughter Rafaela, who turns 7 in three weeks.

Others, like Yvonne Senquize, 14, said they felt connected to Nixzmary because they saw in her a bit of themselves. "She was a child, like me," said Yvonne, who rode her bicycle to the funeral home from her home a few blocks away.

Inside the funeral home, Nixzmary's relatives mourned in silence. By nightfall, the girl's grandmother, Maria Gonzalez, stood staring at the coffin and the stuffed animals, flowers, ribbons and pictures that surrounded it.

Ms. Gonzalez had said little all day. She woke up early, before sunrise, a relative said, and spent many minutes ironing the light-pink dress she wore at the wake. At 9 a.m., she left home with a friend, Awilda Cordero, and headed to a Spanish diner on East 20th Street for a breakfast of eggs, bacon and plantains, Ms. Cordero said.

Nixzmary "looked like an angel," Ms. Cordero said Ms. Gonzalez told her afterward. The girl was clutching a wooden crucifix, pink rosary beads intertwined in her fingers. In a picture placed next to her, she was smiling, wearing a red Power Ranger costume from last Halloween, one of the last times Ms. Gonzalez saw her alive.

Colin Moynihan contributed reporting for this article.

CLARKSTON

Police looking for man who approached kids

Deputies are investigating two reports of a suspicious person loitering near schools. Two girls, 8 and 10 years old, were walking home from school at 4:30 p.m. Jan. 4 on Eastview near Clarkston Elementary when a man driving an older model black SUV asked them if they wanted a ride home. The two girls said no and immediately ran to their home and reported the incident. On Jan. 13, a 13-year-old boy was walking to his bus stop about 6:40 a.m. near the same school when a man got out of an SUV and approached him near the football field. The boy immediately fled. The suspect is a slightly overweight white man in his mid-30s, with short or thinning dark hair. Anyone with information is asked to call (888) 887-6146.

Criticism can eat away self-worth

Choose your words wisely when you correct a child

Barbara F. Meltz / Boston Globe

One of the best gifts you can give your child is a ban on criticism.

When we criticize, a child comes to think there is something wrong with her. Not with what she does or says, not with the choice she makes or her decision-making process, but with the essence of who she is.

"The effects can be profound," says parent educator and best-selling author Adele Faber.

How we communicate with a child over time is how he ends up communicating with himself. If the messages parents give are hopeful, optimistic, and full of faith and pride in a child, the reflection grows into a sense of confidence and competence. Facing a challenge, this child tells himself, "This is hard, but I can do it." If a parent's messages are repeatedly harsh, critical and negative, "the child's image of himself is as bad, unworthy, incompetent," says child and adolescent psychiatrist Gene V. Beresin, associate professor at Harvard who practices at Massachusetts General Hospital. This child faces a challenge and likely asks himself, "Why bother?"

The more a child thinks there is something intrinsically wrong, the less likely he is to think there is anything he can do about it. He might think, for instance, "I can't learn my math skills because I'm not smart enough." In his mind, his intelligence is fixed and finite, says psychologist Dawna Markova, president of Smartwired.org, a Web site for parents, and author of "The Smart Parenting Revolution" (Ballantine, 2005).

In contrast, a child whose parents convey a capacity to grow and learn is likely to have what Markova calls an orientation of mastery, a pick-yourself-up-dust-yourself-off attitude.

To be fair, there are degrees of criticism. Drexel University psychologist Myrna Shure says some is "downright criminal, the lowest rung of the ladder," statements such as, "You're a slob, your room looks like a pig pen," which is belittling and shaming. But even well-intentioned criticism hurts.

It's not as if parents can never offer advice or be constructive. The trick is to come across as a coach, not a critic. Faber offers some strategies for doing this:

Describe the problem instead of telling what's wrong with him: "You're the one who wanted a dog, and now it feels like I'm the one who's walking him," rather than, "You promised you would walk the dog! I can't count on you."

Describe your feelings instead of assuming his. For instance, "I get so frustrated when I cook a nice meal and by the time you get to the table, everything is cold," rather than, "Why are you so inconsiderate?"

Give information, not orders: "When it's snowing, the best protection against sitting through classes with wet feet all day is to wear boots instead of sneakers," rather than, "Can't you see it's snowing? Where's your brain? You can't wear sneakers!" Or try a one-word chant: "Boots. Boots. Boots."

If you do all this and you still don't change your child's mind, change the mood instead, says Faber: Use a made-up language or accent, a song, a poem, or humor to make your point. And if

that still doesn't work, depending on the situation, natural consequences are often the best teacher.

When Faber's grandson, Sam, was a toddler and prone to messes, he shook his Sippy Cup so hard that the lid flew off. Juice was everywhere. He went to pieces. His mother said, "Oh, Sammy, you didn't want that to happen, did you? You found out that when you shake a Sippy Cup too hard, it shakes all over the place!"

Days later, Faber was visiting. She put her packages on the counter where they knocked over a vase.

"Oh, Nana!" Sammy told her, his voice oozing empathy. "You didn't want that to happen, did you? You found out you have to be careful where you put things."

Problem of Homelessness in Los Angeles and Its Environs Draws Renewed Calls for Attention

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD
The New York Times

Published: January 15, 2006

LOS ANGELES, Jan. 14 -It was not the sort of Chamber of Commerce cheer expected from the chief executive of one the nation's sunniest and most tourist-conscious cities.

But Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa of Los Angeles stood before the news media this week and declared unequivocally, "This is the capital of homelessness in America."

The mayor was reacting to the bald truth of a report released Thursday, based on what officials called the most comprehensive census and survey of homelessness in Los Angeles County, that found 88,345 homeless people in the city and surrounding communities.

No other county in the country comes close - the five boroughs of New York have 48,155 homeless people, according to figures from its own census last year reported to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

But even if he wanted to, Mr. Villaraigosa, six months into his first term, would find it difficult these days to skirt the homeless problem here.

For one thing, he had made a campaign promise to increase the supply of affordable housing and recently pledged \$50 million for a trust fund that has helped finance more than 3,500 units for the poor since 2002. Only about 12 percent of the households in the county can afford the median home price, about \$500,000.

The Los Angeles County government has allocated \$25 million for increased emergency shelters, which advocates for the homeless say are badly needed; there are 18,000 homeless shelter beds, which critics call paltry considering the much higher number of homeless people. In March, a group of city and county leaders, Bring Los Angeles Home, plans to issue an overdue report on confronting the problem, a spokesman for the group said this week. The group's stated goal is to end homelessness within 10 years.

In addition, much soul-searching came after the Los Angeles police last fall publicly accused several suburban law enforcement agencies of adding to the woes of the downtown neighborhood Skid Row by dropping off homeless troublemakers there. Around the same time, a front-page series by Steve Lopez, a Los Angeles Times columnist, documenting wanton drug dealing and lewd behavior in Skid Row despite years of promises to clean it up, further galvanized public discussion.

Homeless advocates said they were cautiously optimistic that the tide of events might lead to a decrease in homelessness, having experienced previous spasms of interest that eventually faded. They are waiting to see the extent to which the root causes of homelessness here - high poverty rates and a dearth of affordable housing and mental and drug treatment services - are tackled.

"I want this to be a watershed moment," said Lisa Fisher, director of the Westside Shelter and Hunger Coalition, a consortium of groups aiding the homeless. "How many homeless people are enough to move county, city and community members to action?"

Another advocate, Joel John Roberts, the chief executive of the nonprofit People Assisting the Homeless, said he was not sure whether to take all of the results as gospel. A spokesman for the Department of Housing and Urban Development said all the homeless census reports they received would be reviewed to evaluate their reliability.

But Mr. Roberts said, "This is the first time in many years that the city of L.A. and county of L.A. are stepping up to the plate and saying we are deal with this problem."

The new head count in Los Angeles hewed close to previous estimates, but advocates for the homeless and government officials said it was important to quantify the population in order to raise awareness and seek government financing. Indeed, the survey was spurred mainly by HUD, which had asked cities and counties to do the count and uses such data as a factor in weighing grants.

The report held few surprises for people who follow the issue closely, but it did reaffirm some suspicions.

Most of the homeless surveyed in greater Los Angeles, 78 percent, said they were living here before they lost shelter, contrary to popular belief that the warm climate drew the homeless from other places.

"The perception that homeless people come here from other places has allowed a sense that it is not really our problem," said Mitchell Netburn, executive director of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, which compiled the report. It is based on a count in January 2005 of people in shelters, on the streets and other places. In addition, 3,000 homeless people were sampled to project demographic and other trends in the overall population.

The authority surveyed the homeless in 85 of the county's 88 cities, finding 82,291 homeless people there, and combined its count with separate censuses taken in the three other cities. Census takers found the homeless population spread out across the sprawling county, with pockets of homeless in generally affluent communities in Los Angeles like Brentwood and suburban expanses outside the city limits like the San Gabriel and Antelope Valleys. The City of Los Angeles had by far the largest homeless population, with 48,103 people.

The report said 49 percent of the population was chronically homeless, meaning they had a physical or mental disability and had been living in a shelter or in and out of them for at least a year. The median age of the homeless was 43, and nearly 39 percent of the homeless were black. Twenty-nine percent were white and 25 percent Hispanic.

Just as politicians sought to emphasize their efforts to resolve the problem, another report, by the National Coalition for the Homeless and National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, was released this week calling Los Angeles among the country's "meanest" cities (ranked No. 18 of 20) in treating its homeless. The report cited an ordinance restricting people from loitering outside libraries and other public facilities and ticketing "sweeps" by the police of homeless people.

Mary Grady, a spokeswoman for William J. Bratton, the Los Angeles police chief, said the police simply enforced the city's laws and went after "those who are actually victimizing the homeless population and mentally ill population."

Mayor Villaraigosa also disputed any meanness, emphasizing the promised effort to aid the homeless.

John Batteste, 60, who has been homeless in South Los Angeles for several years since drug addiction and the death of a son took their toll, said he was sleeping in a park until outreach workers found him and persuaded him to enter a treatment program. He lives in 39 West, the residence for the homeless where the report was announced, and receives counseling and other services there.

"They need more of these facilities here," Mr. Batteste said. "I would probably still be in that park without them."

In Westland, let warming center reopen

January 16, 2006

The City of Westland's refusal to grant a zoning variance to keep a warming center open is forcing church workers to turn away homeless people on cold nights. While a long-term solution might have to wait until summer, the community could take temporary steps now to avoid a tragedy.

Westland's Zoning Board of Appeals in October closed a warming center that was operated by Full Gospel Temple, saying the church had no authority for such a facility in a residential area. The church's soup kitchen also closed but reopened on Oct. 24 at the request of Mayor Sandra Cicirelli.

Church workers at Full Gospel Temple's Lighthouse building have showers, cots and blankets, but they can't let people in because of the city order. The church is between a low-income neighborhood called "shack town" and a new upscale subdivision. It's also near two schools, and some neighbors have expressed concerns about safety. Still, there is no evidence to suggest the homeless people are dangerous, and the church has even offered to bus them to another location in the morning.

The warming center, open for five years, had served 30-40 people a night. The church must now refer people looking for help to other shelters and services, but most of them take only families, not single people.

"People are going to die out there," the Rev. Michael Enersen, the church's senior pastor, said. "Why shut something down that was working, without any government help, when the need is so great?"

The city ought to grant the church a short-term variance to operate its warming center until April 1 -- and do it now, before someone dies.

When the weather warms, the city and church can work out a long-term solution. But when temperatures can fall below zero anytime, the community must deal with this emergency immediately.

Detroit Free Press Editorial

Homeless Help

Super Bowl 'party' can have lasting results

January 16, 2006

It's pretty clear why the city is helping to sponsor a Super Bowl party for the homeless at Detroit Rescue Mission: To get them off the streets as part of the push to put a fresh face on the city for the thousands of tourists and journalists who will be in town for the big football game.

But what happens to the homeless on the Monday after the game?

Actually, the party could launch some long-term improvements for them if city officials, shelters and social services providers continue to work together after Super Bowl weekend.

Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries will open its activities center at 138 Stimson to the homeless Feb. 3-5, with four big-screen televisions to watch the game and coverage. The shelter will also stay open round-the-clock from Jan. 27 to Feb. 5, said chief executive officer Chad Audi. The extended shelter hours, transportation, food and televisions will cost the shelter about \$20,000. The city, which is pushing efforts to get the homeless off the street, might pick up part of the tab.

Audi expects 200 to 400 homeless people for the three-day party. Substance abuse and mental health counselors and other social service providers will be around to talk to people and offer help with

housing, employment and other problems.

Services to the homeless are inadequate, but an equal obstacle is getting information to them about available services, as well as coordinating the programs provided by numerous agencies.

If nothing else, the hyper-concern for the city's image preceding the Super Bowl has raised Detroit's awareness about its estimated 10,000 to 13,000 homeless. The agencies that work the Super Bowl party at Detroit Rescue Mission ought to continue their joint efforts long after Feb. 5.

Where homeless people are concerned, Detroit should not be content to return to business as usual when the tourists and cameras leave town.

Published January 17, 2006

State probes assisted-living center death Man, 86, found dead outside Owosso facility

By Hugh Leach
Lansing State Journal

OWOSSO - State and local authorities are investigating an assisted-living facility here after an 86-year-old resident earlier this month was found frozen to death outside the home.

Employees at the Oliver Woods Retirement Village became concerned the morning of Jan. 7 when Gerald Blackmer did not show up for breakfast, said Michael Compeau, director of public safety for Owosso.

About 9:30 a.m., after searching the facility, workers found Blackmer dead outside the home. Preliminary autopsy results show he died of hypothermia.

Workers at the facility told police they had checked on Blackmer at 2 a.m. and he was OK. Residents at the facility can come and go as they please, but are encouraged to sign in and out, said Sandra Ritz, the administrator at Oliver Woods.

"We're investigating the circumstances of what happened," Compeau said. "We'll confer with local prosecutors and make a decision on any charges."

Ritz refused to comment specifically on the incident beyond providing an e-mailed statement.

"State and federal laws pertaining to resident confidentiality preclude Oliver Woods from disclosing any details regarding the incident other than that the resident's family, physician and proper authorities have all been timely notified," the statement read. "Oliver Woods has been and will continue to cooperate with all interested parties. Our thoughts, prayers, and continued support go out to the resident's family."

Compeau said it would be several weeks before police conclude their investigation.

T.J. Bucholz, spokesman for the state Department of Community Health, said the case has been referred to the Department of Human Services, which regulates assisted-living facilities.

"(The state) will be looking to see if the home had done all it was required to do," he said. "If it had, there will probably be no penalty. If not, there could be penalties, and there

could also be criminal penalties for some of the people who work there if they did not follow protocol."

Blackmer's son, Dale Blackmer of Grand Haven, said his father enjoyed living at Oliver Woods, where he had lived since November 2005.

"He called it his little palace. He had a good time there and made friends with everyone," Dale Blackmer said of his father, who was active in the Chesaning Boy Scouts, served in the Army in World War II and spent 42 months as a prisoner of war in the Philippines.

Blackmer said doctors had indicated his father might have suffered dementia on a sporadic basis, but that it was not a daily occurrence.

"We don't know what happened or why it happened," Blackmer said. "We don't have answers."

Assistant City Editor Jason Cody contributed to this report.

Published January 15, 2006
[From the Lansing State Journal]

Dani Meier and Kate Rosenblum: Michigan, allow second-parent adoptions

As clinicians and researchers who have worked on adoption issues for many years, we wholly endorse state Rep. Paul Condino's House Bill 5399 to allow unmarried couples to jointly adopt a child in Michigan.

This bill is consistent with the goal of creating a pro-family environment for Michigan's children, and has received bipartisan support in the Legislature.

No one argues the value of having a healthy two-parent home to raise a child, but a couple's ability to provide a stable, loving home should be the criterion for eligibility to adopt, not that couple's marital status - especially in a state that refuses some of its citizens the right to marry.

Creating legal avenues for second-parent adoptions will help protect children in Michigan.

Our state should recognize and support the efforts of committed parents to provide secure homes and loving families for children. Qualifying as an adoptive parent involves going through a rigorous screening process, including home visits, interviews and evaluations by adoption professionals.

In addition, many of these parents have reached out to our state's neediest children. A couple's willingness to undertake the lengthy and demanding process required to adopt certainly demonstrates a conscious commitment to parenthood that vastly exceeds the requirements to obtain a marriage license.

All children - of married and unmarried couples - face potential losses as a result of parental breakups, illness or death. The children of an unmarried couple deserve no less protection to have both adults with parental rights. Without the legal protections that come with adoption, many of Michigan's children may be denied access to basic benefits, such as health insurance and inheritance rights.

In the event that a child of an unmarried couple becomes ill, the legal parent's partner may be unable to authorize medical treatment and may even be denied hospital visitation rights. In the most tragic of circumstances when a child's legally recognized parent dies, he or she may be removed from the care and custody of his or her other parent and denied access to one of the people who has loved and raised them.

In short, without the legal protections provided by joint adoption tragic losses can be compounded, leaving children in our state needlessly vulnerable.

Rep. Condino's bill would not diminish existing rights for birth parents in any way. And given that 4,500 of the 14,000 children in Michigan's foster care system have a goal of adoption, it is in the best interest of children to expand the pool of loving homes to adopt them and to provide safeguards that all children deserve regardless of their parents' marital status.

Legal protections that come with joint adoption can increase a couples' ability to care for their children socially and economically, and provide families with a sense of security and peace of mind. HB 5399 will strengthen adoptive families, protect vulnerable children and create a more secure family environment for many of Michigan's citizens. Dani Meier lives in Jackson

Kate Rosenblum lives in Ann Arbor

A child is waiting

Teen wants to look up to a hero at home

BY ROSEMARY DORR
Special to The Detroit News

When he smiles, David shows a big dimple, and these days he's smiling more often.

"I learned to do my homework," says the 15-year-old. "I learned not to bother people."

A ninth-grader, David attends special education classes. "He's getting As and Bs," says his foster mother. "They do a good job." Smiling, she adds, "He's a movable kid. On the move all the time."

The teen, who experienced tremendous hurts and losses, receives therapy to help him deal with issues.

David has his heroes ("The ones fighting in Iraq," he says). However,

closer to home, he wants "someone I can look up to." His adoption worker hopes to find the family he needs — supportive, committed, and able to provide individual attention.

Might you consider adoption? Please talk with Kathleen Schoenherr at Judson Center, (313) 794-5653.

Last column's child: Antrenia, 9, a girl who enjoys reading, drawing and singing hopes for a permanent family. For information, call Bonnie Powers at Wayne County Department of Human Services, (313) 396-0394.

A child is waiting appears Tuesdays in Features.



David Coates / The Detroit News

The playful and energetic David, 15, is still learning how to deal with past issues in life.

Nursing Home Inspections Miss Violations, Report Says

By ROBERT PEAR
The New York Times

Published: January 16, 2006

WASHINGTON, Jan. 15 - State inspectors often overlook serious deficiencies, including life-threatening conditions, in the nation's nursing homes, Congressional investigators say in a new report.

In the report, the investigators, from the Government Accountability Office, questioned data used by the Bush administration in arguing that its policies have fostered "significant improvements" in the nation's nursing homes.

Nursing homes must meet federal standards to participate in Medicaid and Medicare. Homes are inspected by state employees working under contract to the federal government.

Much of the apparent improvement has resulted from the fact that those state inspectors "missed serious deficiencies" or understated their severity, the accountability office said.

The Congressional investigators found pervasive understatement of "serious deficiencies that cause actual harm or immediate jeopardy to patients." The harm includes severe weight loss, "multiple falls resulting in broken bones and other injuries, and serious, avoidable pressure sores," the report said. The deficiencies included fire safety violations.

The top Medicare official, Dr. Mark B. McClellan, said that he too was "concerned about possible understatement or omission of serious deficiencies" by state inspectors.

Over all, Dr. McClellan said, the quality of nursing home care has improved in the last five years. But, he said, these gains are in jeopardy because Congress has not provided enough money and state budgets for this purpose are "very limited."

Dr. McClellan said the Bush administration wanted to link payment of nursing homes to the quality of care they provide. He said he expected to test such a "pay for performance" system this year.

Medicaid, the federal-state program for low-income people, covers two-thirds of the nation's 1.6 million nursing home residents. Together, Medicaid and Medicare spend more than \$67 billion a year on nursing home care.

The study was requested by Senators Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, and Herb Kohl, Democrat of Wisconsin. "If state surveyors are missing serious deficiencies in the quality of

care, then the federal government has not yet achieved the necessary level of improvement in oversight of the inspection process," said Mr. Grassley, who is chairman of the Finance Committee.

In its report, the Government Accountability Office made these points:

States often take weeks or months to start investigating reports of harm to nursing home residents. These reports come from patients and their relatives and from nursing home employees.

Some useful information on nursing home quality is available at a federal Web site, but much of the data is inaccurate or unreliable.

The timing of inspections is highly predictable. This "allows homes to conceal problems if they so desire."

Concerns about cost have delayed the installation of automatic sprinkler systems in older nursing homes. More than 20 percent of homes lack such fire protection devices. The industry wants the government to help pay the installation costs, estimated at \$1 billion.

Dr. McClellan said the proportion of nursing homes cited for serious deficiencies had declined sharply, to 16 percent last year from 29 percent in 1999.

The Government Accountability Office found great variation from state to state, and it suggested that inspectors were more rigorous in some states.

From 2003 to 2005, the report said, California cited 6 percent of its nursing homes for serious violations, while Connecticut cited 54 percent of its homes.

Senator Kohl said, "There are too many inconsistencies in what is deemed a deficiency from state to state."

The accountability office said that some inspectors were confused about the meaning of "actual harm." As a result, it said, the same conditions are sometimes viewed as a violation of federal rules in one state but not in others.

Texas reported a big decline in serious deficiencies over the last five years. But one reason, the report said, is that Texas had "a significant number of inexperienced surveyors" who were hesitant to cite nursing homes for major violations.

The Bush administration said that, by some measures, the regulation of nursing homes had improved. For example, it said, inspectors investigated 47,124 complaints in 2004, reflecting an increase of 45 percent over the number investigated in 1999.

Moreover, Dr. McClellan said, inspectors have paid more attention to fire safety since 31 people died in nursing home fires in Connecticut and Tennessee in 2003. Inspectors identified 47,456 fire-safety violations in 2004, an increase of 20 percent over the previous year.

Federal employees visit about 5 percent of the nation's 17,000 nursing homes each year to validate the findings of state inspectors. In 28 percent of these visits from 2002 to 2004, the federal agents found serious problems not detected by state inspectors. This proportion has increased in recent years, from 22 percent in 2000 to 2001.

County ISD awarded \$150,000 to aid early-childhood training

Saturday, January 14, 2006

By Brian Wheeler
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Local educators and community leaders will look at training day-care providers and providing better learning materials to parents, thanks to a \$150,000 grant that targets early-childhood learning.

The Jackson County Intermediate School District hailed the state money as a key step to link local efforts to make sure young children learn. The governor and educators tout early attention as vital to academic success.

Jackson was one of three ISDs in the state to receive that much money from the Michigan Early Childhood Investment Corp.

"We've been kind of marching side by side with our partners. We think (the grant) will give us the structure to make this happen long-term," said Marilyn Ostrander, the ISD's assistant superintendent.

The grant will let the ISD and 52 partners develop a Great Start Collaborative -- planning money to look at how to help parents and their young children. The grant is for one year, but there's a prospect for future grants to act on ideas.

"This is a great opportunity for Jackson and the surrounding area," state Sen. Mark Schauer said in a statement. "I am eager to see what new relationships and infrastructure develop as a result."

Ostrander said she saw the grant as recognizing a local collaboration between such entities as the ISD, the Community Action Agency, schools, the library system and United Way. All have programs aimed at children from birth to age 6.

She said a likely thrust of the planning work would be to look at parents' access to educational materials and training child-care providers throughout the community.

"We want quality child-care providers," Ostrander said, "and we know that training is a key to quality."

Michigan

Job losses, deficit set stage for budget battle

January 13, 2006

BY CHRIS CHRISTOFF

FREE PRESS LANSING BUREAU CHIEF

LANSING -- Continued job losses among Michigan's automakers and their suppliers will leave Gov. Jennifer Granholm and lawmakers struggling again to balance the state budget this year and probably in 2007, state economists said Thursday.

Stagnant tax revenues and a certain deficit are likely to ignite tense debate over tax cuts proposed by Republican leaders, which Granholm has said the state can't afford without cutting into programs.

The agreement Thursday among state analysts on tax revenue figures for 2006 will frame this year's budget debate. It is also a prelude to Granholm's State of the State address on Jan. 25, when she will unveil her agenda in a year that will be dominated not only by education and state finances but also by her re-election campaign.

Granholm's top budget adviser, Mary Lannoye, rejected Republican suggestions earlier this week that a \$220-million surplus from last fiscal year could be set aside in the state's surplus fund to pay for a proposed \$30-million tax cut for small businesses.

Lannoye said the surplus is already tagged to pay for a 4-year, \$600-million business tax cut approved in December.

"It's going to be a tough year, we're going to be hundreds of millions of dollars short," Lannoye said. "I'm not going to say we're making cuts. We don't need to be making deposits in the rainy day fund to make matters worse."

The state will have about 1% less to spend than last year from an \$8.2-billion general fund. That will not keep up with rising demands for health services and increased costs for universities, prisons and employee wages.

However, money for public schools will increase nearly 3% to \$11.2 billion, thanks to relatively healthy sales and use tax revenues.

Michigan's unemployment is expected to top 7% in 2006, compared with a national rate of 4.8%. The state is expected to lose 30,700 jobs in 2006.

The decline is directly tied to loss of market share by the Big Three automakers, said George Fulton, economist for the Research Seminar in Quantitative Economics in Ann Arbor.

Contact **CHRIS CHRISTOFF** at 517-372-8660 or christoff@freepress.com

Lansing State Journal

January 15, 2006

Letters

Refugees blameless

I read with amazement the Jan. 5 letter by Diane Simmons regarding refugees. Undoubtedly, Simmons' family came to our country as immigrants; they were most likely not refugees, but they were outsiders nonetheless.

So, as the offspring of immigrants, why is Simmons "deeply troubled by these arrivals"? Her concern about who pays for services to refugees is thinly veiled xenophobia.

As a conservative, I believe government should not spend without restraint and should demand accountability for spending on social programs. Spending money on ineffective or mismanaged programs is wasteful.

However, unlike Simmons, I do not use my conservatism to disguise a prejudice against another group of people who might not have immigrated as recently as her or my family.

Yes, our state has problems with its welfare system and its economy, but blaming refugees and immigrants for these woes demonstrates ignorance of the real issue and perpetuates bigotry.

David Marvin
Lansing

'They give ... and they give again'; donations swamp center

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Monday, January 16, 2006

By Kris Turner kturner@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6249 **JOURNAL STAFF WRITER**

FLINT - More than 15,000 people had a little something extra to put under their Christmas trees this holiday season because of donations disbursed by the Resource Center.

The center, which collected about \$90,000 in goods last year, brought in items worth an estimated \$147,500 this past season, said Sybyl Atwood, the center's volunteer services program director.

"It was better than last year," she said. "It's kind of interesting. Some agencies did not get as many things as they wanted, but the gifts that came were very generous."

Atwood said people gave despite natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Asian tsunami, which tapped people's pocketbooks throughout the year.

"They give, they give, and they give again," she said. "What is amazing to me is people in Genesee County gave generously to the Katrina efforts, but they also came forward on this.

"People did extremely well with their generosity, in spite of Katrina."

About 12,000 T-shirts were given to the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Flint, 3701 N. Averill Ave., and its staff distributed them throughout the community, Executive Director Jamie Gaskin said. The donor wishes to remain anonymous.

"It really is an exciting opportunity to share something with the whole community," he said. "We certainly can't, as an organization, use all those shirts. It was a little bit of a challenge to get them delivered. We had half a dozen of us unloading the truck by hand. "The process of distributing them was very easy. Other than just a few boxes, they are all spoken for."

Although the shirts were intended to be gifts, some will be used to help keep schoolchildren safe, Gaskin said. Now children going on field trips will dress alike so that every child has a similar appearance, he added.

"They are helping to address safety issues and work out very well for that kind of thing," he said. Other donations are helping to keep some Flint School District students warm. Hats, gloves, socks and shoes were given to the district to be distributed throughout its various schools, said Connie Rau, director of the youth projects program.

"The response was tremendous," she said. "It's absolutely awesome when you look at the numbers of what we are doing."

QUICK TAKE

Resource Center
holiday donations

AMOUNT: Nearly \$147,500 in goods were collected, which helped about 15,000 people. In 2004, the center

received approximately \$90,000 in donations.

UNUSUAL

GENEROSITY:

About 12,000 T-shirts, 12 beds and three gas dryers were some of the items donated.

One family that was adopted by employees from Delphi Corp. had its best Christmas to date, Rau said.

"The mother wrote us a 'thank you' letter, and as long as I've been in the business, I've never seen a better 'thank you' letter," Rau said. "I even got a call from the Delphi Jobs Bank, and they had some money left over, so they went out and bought food for this family."

But charity should extend beyond the season of giving, Rau said.

"It's great that people remember people during the holidays," she said. "But there is a need 52 weeks a year."

Project has warm outcome

Jackson Citizen Patriot

Monday, January 16, 2006

In his quest to obtain the rank of Eagle Scout, Andy Bowen completed a service project that provided warm accessories for the Jackson Interfaith Shelter.

Despite having cerebral palsy, Bowen is a Jackson High School honor student and member of Boy Scout Troop 305 of Jackson Free Methodist Church. His Scout project collected more than 250 hats, gloves and mittens for the Interfaith Shelter.

Bowen, 17, received help with his project from his parents, Paul and Darcy Bowen; fellow troop members; Universalist Unitarian Church of East Liberty; and Dawn Food Products, his mother's employer.

"I wanted to do something that would help locally," Bowen said. "I've worked at the Interfaith Shelter before, so I felt good about doing something that helped them out."

According to Kitrina Sims, client advocate for the Interfaith Shelter, Bowen's donations came at a good time.

"Not only were we able to distribute his donations to our clients, but we had enough to give to the people who line up outside our doors," Sims said. "What a sweet and thoughtful thing for this young man to do for his community."

Scouts have until their 18th birthday to complete a gambit of requirements necessary to attain the coveted Eagle Scout designation. Bowen is awaiting his final interview process with the Eagle Scout committee.

Toy drive a success

The Cascades Amateur Radio Society Inc. recently participated in a nationwide drive to help provide toys for kids affected by the series of hurricanes in Florida.

Linda Stanley, the club's public information officer who chaired the event, said fellow members responded heartily despite receiving little notice of the toy drive. The Jackson club donated 36 toys to the drive, which was sponsored by the Amateur Radio Relay League.

"We had great club support despite having a time line of less than three weeks to mail out our donations to Memphis," Stanley said. "We're a small club, and I'm proud that we were recognized nationally by AARL."

Stanley received shopping help from fellow club member Joann Van Alstine.

Holiday dinners

Teresa Vaughn hates to see people alone at Christmas.

That's why the Jackson woman and friend Paula Sirbaugh began co-hosting Christmas dinners for those who had no place to go.

"It started out that I had people coming to my house for dinner and Paula had people at hers," said Vaughn, who works with Sirbaugh at Virginia Coney Island. "We decided to do one dinner together and finally had to find a hall."

The Park Forest Apartments clubhouse now accommodates a growing guest list of more than 40 people. Vaughn said her husband, Timothy, transports guests unable to drive, while her six children are great at putting guests at ease.

"I just hate to see people alone on the holidays," Vaughn said.

Improving lives of poor focus of discussion

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, January 16, 2006

By Kris Turner kturner@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6249

JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

FLINT - Solutions to helping the poor move into the work force and climb the economic ladder will be discussed by a panel of leaders from throughout Genesee County on Tuesday night.

The panel will meet at 7 p.m. at the International Institute, 515 Stevens St.

Talking about how to improve the lives of the poor can make a difference and should involve every member of the community, said Judge Duncan M. Beagle, a panelist who presides over the family division of the Genesee County Circuit Court.

"I'm not sure if people are aware of how bad the poverty and social conditions are in parts of the Genesee County area, most of which is in the city of Flint," he said. "The bottom line is most of us see what is happening with families on an everyday basis. In my particular job, I see it from the petitions that are filed for abuse and neglect."

The cross section of people, including Walter Milton Jr., the Flint School District superintendent, and Lawrence Reynolds, a Mott Children's Health Center clinical director, should help the panel get a good look at what is happening in the county, said Denise Chambers, a panelist and director of the Genesee County Department of Human Services.

"It will be interesting to see how the different perspectives ... can all come together to make things better," she said. "We need to put all types of resources together to bring about any type of change."

By using smart urban planning, cities and states can help to rebuild areas that have experienced an economic decline, said David Lossing, a panelist and mayor of Linden.

Designating an area for a specific use, such as a business district or neighborhood, can help control the flow of people in and out of a given area, Lossing said.

"The question is how do local elected officials combine efforts to solve a problem that's been going on for 30 to 40 years," he said. "It's not going to be very easy, and it's probably not going to occur overnight."

"We've got the talent here in Genesee County. You rebuild the tax base, which then helps fund city services and the school districts. Then they are able to maintain their buildings and hire quality teachers - you are building the core from the inside out."

As communities and the economy change, people need to educate themselves so they can find a job, Beagle said.

"Flint is reinventing itself," he said. "That can be a good or bad thing. At the turn of the century, we became an auto town. Throughout the 20th century, the automobile was the result of our population increasing. But those type of solid jobs we had were reduced."

"We certainly want to encourage young people to have an education. I don't care if it's a college degree or job training. We've got to have a change in the mindset around here."

DAWSON BELL: **GOP plays rope-a-dope with minimum wage**

January 16, 2006

BY DAWSON BELL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

I've not been asked to work on the draft, so I cannot be certain that Gov. Jennifer Granholm will include a call for an increase in the minimum wage in her State of the State address later this month. But it's probably a good bet.

She did a year ago. Since the Republican majorities in the state House and Senate ignored the request (and the governor hardly mentioned it again over the succeeding 12 months), it's a simple matter of cut and paste.

Democrats have been ramping up a ballot proposal on the issue for November, buoyed by successful efforts in Florida and Nevada in 2004 and led by labor unions and liberal activists who believe a minimum wage hike will boost turnout among their voters.

What's less of a sure thing -- but still falling in the good-bet category -- is that Republicans will agree. Not that raising the minimum wage is a good idea, but that a ballot proposal might be good for Democrats.

And that a minimum wage ballot proposal written by liberal interest groups would be worse than a modest one approved by the Legislature.

For the record, Republicans haven't signaled any willingness to drop their opposition to a hike in the minimum wage (currently \$5.15 an hour).

When called upon, they sensibly argue that Michigan's economic woes won't be allayed by a job-depressing mandate on employers.

They also point out that the damage from reducing the incentive to hire low-productivity workers is inflicted most heavily on the poor, the undereducated and those who are marginally employable.

Although those constituencies are viewed as Democratic, Republicans can't expect thanks for coming to their defense.

Last week, Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Mark Brewer instantly pounced on what he called the "insensitive comments" of his GOP counterpart Saul Anuzis and House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi.

Anuzis and DeRoche suggested, respectively, that a minimum wage hike would damper job prospects for inner-city youths and people with disabilities.

According to Brewer, it is "outrageous" and "unacceptable" to associate minimum wage earning with minimum wage earners. But the episode is instructive in the politics of the minimum wage. To most voters, who earn multiples of the minimum and still struggle paycheck to paycheck, \$5.15 an hour is an unimaginable income. As backers of an increase know, it offends their sense of basic fairness.

The Michigan Democratic ballot campaign for a higher minimum wage is called Michigan Needs a Raise. Who's to argue with that? My guess is that it won't be Michigan Republicans. It may take awhile for the GOP rope-a-dope strategy to play out. Business groups will gnash their teeth over another counterproductive government mandate. But in the end, they'll have to

consider whether they're better off with a 33% hike with automatic annual inflationary increases (the Democratic ballot proposal) or a legislative alternative (say, \$5.85 an hour). Here's betting they'll go with the evil of two lessers.

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News Release

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Three high performing Michigan offices to be part of federal visit

January 17, 2006

Michigan Department of Human Services offices in Benton Harbor, Lansing and Saginaw will be part of a federal tour of Midwestern welfare offices during February. The tour, being conducted by staff from the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Midwest regional office from Chicago, is to see what these offices do that makes them exceptional administrators of the federal Food Stamp Program (called Food Assistance Program in Michigan.)

"There are a number of high performing Food Stamp Program offices in the Midwest region that clearly stand a cut above the rest," Tim English, regional director of the federal Food Stamp Program, said in a Dec. 22 letter. "The Food and Nutrition Service's goal is to find out what exactly makes some offices perform at a high level — what do they have in common, and share that information across states/regions."

English stated that they will observe the offices day-to-day operations to find certain characteristics that they have in common. Their current plans are to conduct 15 local office visits this year as listed below.

"Michigan has three of the 15 high performing sites identified in the Midwest," said DHS director Marianne Udow. "We are proud of these achievements from local office staff in these and all Michigan counties for their contributions in more effectively administering our state's program."

Federal representatives intend to use the one-day visits to gather information through observation and interviews. Their tentative schedule includes visits to:

Hamilton County, Ohio – week of January 23, 2006
Saginaw County, Michigan – week of February 13, 2006
Ingham County, Michigan – week of February 13, 2006
Berrien County, Michigan – week of February 20, 2006
Butler County, Ohio – week of March 6, 2006
Montgomery County, Ohio – week of March 6, 2006
Ramsey County, Minnesota – week of April 17, 2006
Michigan Avenue Office, Illinois – week of April 17, 2006
Winnebago County, Illinois – week of May 15, 2006
Lake County, Illinois – week of May 15, 2006
Delaware County, Indiana – week of June 19, 2006
Benton County, Minnesota, - week of June 5, 2006
Allen County, Indiana, - week of July 10, 2006
Dane County, Wisconsin – week of July 24, 2006
Racine County, Wisconsin – week of July 24, 2006

A previous news announcement indicated one Michigan site visit would be in Battle Creek. That is incorrect. The correct site is Benton Harbor.

For more information on Michigan's Food Assistance Program go to www.michigan.gov/dhs